

Respect in the neighbourhood: neighbourliness and narratives of decline

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Abstract

The article argues that local social networks are crucial to addressing the perceived shortfall in 'respect' and civility. Meanings of 'respect' are explored and older people's narratives of the decline of neighbourliness are used to explore the sense that for many people 'community' has been lost. It is argued that policy and practice have a role to play in the reinvigoration of local social networks.

A resident complains

Here's a tiny problem for a whole civilisation. On a housing estate, a resident completes a complaint form like this (reproduced as written):

'Some teenagers boys play football or other ball games and keep kicking the balls across the Alleyway (street) resulting the breaking in windows of house on the ground floor.

'They keep throwing, rubbish, bottles, broken furniture, planks of wood or small stones in the alleyway, results not only leave the street dirty, but also saftey hazards. Few times I was injured because some one throw broken pieces of chair which landed on my head and shoulder, and I ended up in Hospital. If we try to tell these teenager boys they gang against us, swear at us and throw stone and kicking on our front door. Few times they dented & scratched our cars, but unable to point out that which boys did the actual damage. We requested the Authorities to erract a wire net fence on the wall which is facing the Alleyway, which might save us from the Harrasement and also if they send letter to these above householder to respect other people 's property and abstain from Harrasing other people.'

[Housing association complaint form, west London, May 2006]

There are familiar themes in this testimony: the resident's sense of disempowerment and injustice; the difficulty of engaging with the boys; the inappropriateness of the space in which the boys are playing; perceptions of disorder; the struggle to get an effective response from an authority; the paucity of options for the complainant. These issues remind us how quality of life can be impoverished without a sense of security and 'mutual self-interest' between neighbours. The degree to which that sense of neighbourly security is available to residents – and is capable of being refreshed – varies enormously. But it could be a far more significant component in quality of life than is generally recognised, especially when other elements are in short supply.

Perhaps we should ask then, if there is some commonly understood notion of *consideration and respect for others* that is essential if people are to live together on reasonably good terms? Is the government's attempt to package this notion into its Respect agenda (Respect Task Force, 2006) adequate to nurture or re-invigorate such norms? The government has promoted 'respect' primarily as the missing ingredient in the long term reduction of crime, and to buttress civil renewal. Its initial approach – involving a barrage of press releases about anti-social behaviour, the hectoring of local authorities for under-performance in the ASBO league, and establishing a central 'mission squad' – was unsurprisingly described by one observer as 'the reduction of policy to pest control.'¹ More recently, the Communities and Local Government department has hinted at a more considered view:

'Respect is fundamental to functioning communities and places. It is basically about decent standards of behaviour, taking personal responsibility and showing consideration for others.'²

Increasingly, social policy carries an expectation that citizens should regulate not only their own conduct, but also that of others (Flint 2006: 30); this contrasts with the apparent lack of policy concern for local social networks. Given the political salience of localism, it's puzzling that there seems to have been no concerted attempt to inform the Respect agenda with an understanding of neighbouring and social interaction at local level: this article explores that connection.³ I draw on the views of older people concerning the

¹ The remark appeared in a post by Will Davies on the Potlatch weblog, <http://potlatch.typepad.com/>, 5 July 2006.

² See www.communities.gov.uk/communities/respect/. Accessed 22 September 2007.

³ This article is based on sections of *Respect in the Neighbourhood: Why Neighbourliness Matters*, edited by the author and published by Russell House in

decline of neighbourliness as a context for assessing the nature of the problems faced by residents like the tenant quoted above.

What constitutes respect?

With this agenda afforded a high profile by government since 2005, we might have expected more public debate about what constitutes respect. Is it something that has to be earned or is it a neutral value that you hold until you are deemed unworthy of it?

For example, should prisoners be treated with respect, or is it something that can be confiscated along with liberty? Perhaps a prisoner has failed to show respect for others by committing a crime: many people would argue that they have therefore forfeited respect themselves. Does society expect the offender to have learned – to have been taught – respect? If so: where and how? At home, in the neighbourhood, in school and the workplace? As it happens, the Home Office currently seeks to ensure that all prisoners are 'treated with respect for their human dignity,⁴ but it's not clear how this policy squares with the Respect Task Force emphatic assertion that -

**RESPECT
CANNOT BE
LEARNED,
PURCHASED
OR ACQUIRED
IT CAN ONLY
BE EARNED**

(Respect Task Force, 2006: 30)

Like democracy – which ought to be universally applicable in order to function, but somehow isn't - respect and disrespect are experienced unequally (Mehmet Ali, 2006; Phillips and Smith, 2003; 2006). This debate would be helped by political acknowledgment that disrespect is promoted by the system of consumption. Our society is riddled with the sanctioned disrespectful behaviour of 'respectable' citizens and corporate bodies (Harris, 2006a: 14-16).

My view is that respect should be a default attribute of any human relationship unless one or other party proves themselves unworthy of it. Undoubtedly, we all have the capacity to lose respect and a

2006; and on a forthcoming review of neighbourliness and older people carried out by the author for Age Concern England.

⁴ HM Inspectorate of Prisons includes among its four basic tests the requirement that 'prisoners are treated with respect for their human dignity.' See

<http://inspectors.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprison/our-work/>. Accessed 21 September 2007.

consequent onus to regain it: through our institutions and customs we have the responsibility to help people do that. It's worth adding that we don't have to *admire* someone in order to show them respect. Neither do we have to subscribe to policies towards anti-social behaviour which are themselves disrespectful. Levels of incivility are probably not close to a tipping point, but if they are declining then that is a serious issue. We cannot expect to rebalance these levels without focusing on social relations at the neighbourhood level. The neighbourhood is an essential context for the practice of respect.

In the neighbourhood

When people open their front doors to go out, they should not do so in fear of violence or abuse from their neighbours or strangers. Nor should they have to fear the consequences of the conflicts of others, or their vehicles or animals. Citizenship implies a shared 'ownership' over and responsibility for the space surrounding the dwelling, *i.e.* the neighbourhood. We have cause to use that space for various reasons: the instrumental imperatives of everyday life, the basic need for social interaction, the impulse to be moving. Our sense of citizenship will be profoundly affected by the encounters that take place there.

If people are experiencing disorder in their neighbourhoods, it makes sense to ask whether they have the means to generate collective responses which bring about improvement on their terms; and if not, to ask how such responses might be developed. Researchers such as Robert Sampson (2004) and Rowland Atkinson (2006) have drawn attention to the centrality of the citizen in dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime control; and yet the continuing sense of this as a losing battle suggests that there is something missing from our attempts at community engagement in this cause.

Once the discredited 'crack-down' policies have been cleared away and the rhetoric of community engagement has stopped echoing, what remains is a lasting failure of policy to acknowledge the significance and vulnerability of local social networks, and to minimise damage caused to them (Harris, 2006b: 118-119, Nash, 2004). As Atkinson notes,

'while effective local sanctions are seen by policy makers as key mechanisms for dealing with disorder they are undermined by the absence of strong local social networks.'
(Atkinson, 2006: 107)

This weakness may well be the result of various (perhaps otherwise fully justifiable) policies to do with transport, educational choice, commercial competitiveness (local shops vs out of town supermarkets etc), economic development, housing and so on. Because we know too little about how local social networks function and how vulnerable they are, we lack the intellectual resources to defend them or to detect weaknesses; and it is not until they have gone missing that we begin to recognise their significance. Where this fragility is exposed, does it amount to a crisis of neighbourliness?

When I ask people if they feel that neighbourliness is in crisis, almost everyone feels the need to respond by reference to the past: after all, the notion of 'crisis' implies change over time. Some people will certainly assert that in their context and experience, local social relations have improved (this is not always associated with visible physical improvements in the neighbourhood). But many people, older people in particular, articulate a decline in neighbourly relations which they find bewildering, demoralising and disempowering.

Narratives of decline

In 2007 I ran a number of focus groups and workshops with older people on the subject of neighbourliness, and with a broader range of residents on their role as street reps. Participants reflected a sense that neighbourliness had changed since they were young, and most of them clearly felt the practice had in some way declined. People find it very difficult to clarify whether this is more a decline of quantity or of quality, or both, but previous research provides helpful guidance:

'The loss they identified was that of an underpinning security of a close-knit community, of mutual support spanning the generations and involving everybody. This had been replaced by individual support offered by specific neighbours, greatly valued but also seen as more fragile and vulnerable to changing circumstances.' (Godfrey *et al*, 2004: 164)

This suggestion that many neighbourhoods in the past were characterised by a greater volume of available connections, and the density of the enfolding network, is echoed by Paul Watt, who found that narratives of urban decline were commonplace:

'the threads of contemporary neighbourliness were felt to be thinly woven in comparison with the denser community spirit that was said to have existed in the past.' (Watt, 2006: 793. See also Thomése *et al*, 2003: 536)

People readily describe acts of helpfulness and friendliness around them now. But these interactions and exchanges are more individualised and do not seem to amount to a healthy stock of neighbourliness, as a resource on which everyone can draw with confidence and without hesitation, as of right. For the people I spoke to, the resource of neighbourliness has somehow become impoverished. A sense emerges in their accounts of a former enfolding community now mysteriously mislaid.

Diversity and cohesion

However, not all participants were emphatic about levels and standards of neighbouring in the past. One man claimed that things were worse during the second world war:

‘the next door neighbours wouldn’t talk to us. I don’t think anything’s changed over the years.’

He went on to describe an incident where he and his mother were excluded by neighbours from an air-raid shelter: ‘they wouldn’t let us in.’ It then emerged that they were consistently ostracised as a one-parent family. This point neatly illustrates a key aspect of the social changes that underpin this general history: while the intervening years are believed to have seen a general decline of social capital, over the same period we have seen more acceptance of ‘alternative’ lifestyles and an incorporation of previously excluded groups (Arneil, 2006).

Thus, while many people might mourn the weakening of the normative centre over the past couple of generations - as in a decline of norms of behaviour in public, say - from the point of view of certain social groups there has been a strengthening of rights and an invaluable broad raising of awareness of diversity and of the interests of minorities. The plight of a single mother and her son would surely not be so traumatically exposed nowadays. It is in this sense that we need to recognise the ways in which close-knit communities, and the robust civic culture and social capital associated with them, can also represent ‘a powerfully constraining, disciplining or exclusionary force for those groups of people who deviate from the given norms, along religious, ethnic, cultural or gendered lines’ (Arneil, 2006: 39). This raises the question, can we have the advantages of ‘community’ without such disadvantages?

What has changed?

It would be possible to gather together the component parts of the lamented age of neighbouring, described in the literature and in the accounts of some of my focus group participants, with such details as the principle that people's doors were always left open, that children played in the street, that adults always watched over them, and so on. Contrasts were offered to the experience of the focus group participant quoted above: one man for instance said that people in his area used to leave their doors unlocked in the knowledge that neighbours would challenge any intruders. The literature is replete with examples of similarly collective behaviour:

'You shared your stew and you shared your soup, and if your bone had a good bit of bristle on it, it went from pot to pot.' (Hall, 2003: 10)

'All the neighbours helped out, everybody helped everybody else.' (Hall, 2003: 17)

'It didn't matter when you went out or when you came in, you always saw a neighbour and they always spoke to you.' (Clark and Carnegie, 2003: 126)

Focus group participants suggested various changes that they felt had contributed to the subsequent decline, especially

- working lives: 'people are time-scarce'
- the attitudes of young people towards others ('they turn round and say "You can't touch me, I'm fire-proof"')
- and the apparent inability of authorities to take action.

Several commented that 'the younger ones have lost respect' and referred to a lack of discipline, the effects of television, and 'having it all.' They also noted that 'people don't walk':

'You don't see your neighbours, they just get in their cars and go off.'

So if there has been a decline in neighbourliness, is it what we would expect? Yes, because for most of us now, neighbourliness is often no longer *necessary*. Talja Blokland clarifies this crucial point:

'The most significant changes are *the diminished need to be neighbourly* and the increased opportunities to relate to fellow neighbourhood residents *at one's own discretion*.

Neighbourliness is less uniform, and the mutual familiarity of neighbourhood residents has gradually become less public. Generally, therefore, mutual attachments are fading among neighbourhood residents, in keeping with common-sense perceptions. Contrary to common sense, however, the cause of this decline is not that people are unwilling to help each

other or are less social or helpful than in the past or compared to the ideal country village. Rather, it is attributable to the social structure, which increasingly accommodates *structured choices according to personal discretion.*' (Blokland, 2003: 122-123, emphasis added)

The part that may have been played by physical decline, disorder, and inadequate services in this gradual transformation is unclear: after all, for most people the quality of life measured by other (non-social) indicators has improved since the 1930s. But where older people discern a loss of services and amenities, it seems that negative experiences both in and beyond the home can act as triggers to undermine their confidence in their neighbourhood (Scharf *et al*, 2005: 29).

'For some, the changing physical fabric of the neighbourhood appeared to coincide with a deterioration in the quality of relationships with local residents... This came to be reflected in an inability to trust other local people:

"I wouldn't trust any of my neighbours... Neighbours aren't like they used to be in the old days.'" (Scharf *et al*, 2005: 26)

The erosion of confidence and trust can render estates and neighbourhoods less visibly inhabited, with negative consequences. As Farrow and Prior (2006: 5) found in a study of anti-social behaviour and civil renewal,

'the whole issue of trust and distrust appeared hugely significant, and operated across numerous dimensions.'

The researchers concluded that heavy-handed enforcement of anti-social behaviour powers is destructive of trust in the longer term. If the availability of trust as a resource is not taken seriously, much of the effort put into regeneration and community safety will be wasted.

Community lost?

To what extent is the local close-knit community recoverable, given the networked nature of contemporary relationships? Various researchers have contested the general validity of the 'community lost' thesis: Sampson for instance suggests that it 'was wrong 100 years ago and remains so today' (Sampson, 2004: 106. See also, for example, Wellman, 1999). But there is a question of degree here: on an individual level, and within many neighbourhoods, a sense of loss is what people experience and express. Blokland, for example, records it among residents in Rotterdam:

'When asked what had changed or what they had lost, respondents referred to "the unity," the sense of "being together among each other."' (Blokland, 2001: 274)

There are two points I'd like to make about this. First, 'community' lost or mislaid is demonstrably recoverable. The notion of a surrounding sense of 'mutual support spanning the generations and involving everybody' – a sense of community as sanctuary, as fostering, and as protecting – has not disappeared entirely, and those who dismiss it as a myth in the past may need to spend some time examining its contemporary manifestations:

'This is great, around here. I mean I know I can just open my door and shout help and they'll come from all directions.'

(Hartlepool respondent quoted by Godfrey *et al*, 2004: 48)

'In the 80s and 90s they used to come right through and cause trouble... You never knew what was going to happen, whereas now you don't worry... We had a bloke at the top of here who was a real menace to the population. He used to be drunk and fight and throw furniture out of the window. Now you don't have none of that. They've done a darn good job... They're as good as gold over there, they watch [out for] me.'

(Author's interview with older resident, Pembroke Street, Devonport, December 2005)

'You frequently meet the people who are looking after your estate, you're going to meet them on almost a daily basis... You move into a situation where people are concerned about you... it says everything about the kind of trust, and the self-esteem, the kind of mutual concern and care and the general confidence in one another that have been generated by the work of people over twenty years.'

(Resident presentation for Home Office Guide Neighbourhoods scheme, Pembroke Street Estate Management Board, Devonport, [DVD] 2005).

Secondly, however - while filtering out some over-romanticised claims for such close-knit communities, which could be harsh and unforgiving (Bulmer, 1986) – we should reflect more carefully on the feeling of loss that is being expressed. The sentiment points to the validity of a secure, enfolding community, for older people especially, one in which norms are readily absorbed and recognised, and which also offers *interdependence*. In some localities this will come across as fanciful, partly because in contemporary urban society we have got used to outsourcing our responsibilities – with aggressive fences around schools rather than someone looking out for children; with vigilant CCTV on our buildings rather than relaxed 'eyes on the street;' with dispassionate and bureaucratised formal services rather than semi-formal home helps. The task for policy is

to reverse this damaging trend, to reassert the significance of trust, and to rebalance our responsibilities.

Promoting local life

What then might be required to restore levels of mutual respect and strengthen local social networks? In addition to promoting neighbourhood stability, which is already the subject of a great deal of energy and funding, especially around housing and local economic development, I can suggest a few other areas calling for attention.

We need to:

- Maintain an orderly local environment which is walkable and occupied. This is key to sending out signals that local social control is strong.
- Try to understand attitudes towards privacy and its effects on the moral order of the neighbourhood (Stokoe, 2003): what is the difference between 'curtain twitching' and 'eyes on the street'?
- Promote informal social networks. Events such as street parties, and schemes such as street reps and welcoming new neighbours, can be invaluable, as is the availability of local amenities and facilities. Locally applicable policies should include a risk-assessment on their potential to promote or damage social networks.
- Make sure there are formal opportunities for community engagement – but do not assume that there is necessarily a strong correlation between involved community groups and healthy informal social networks. Neighbourhoods that are safer and stronger will have both (Green and Brock, 2005).
- Maintain formal policing, an official presence, and an accessible justice system. The availability and visibility of agencies that perform these roles is critical. The issue is not to strengthen them, but to strengthen other parts of the mix, so that these roles require less emphasis.

(Adapted from Harris, 2006b)

Concluding remarks

I began by quoting a tenant who was experiencing community safety issues. A consideration of views on the perceived decline of neighbourliness and the need to reinvest in 'respect' illustrates just how complex such situations are, and suggests that the viability of local social networks is crucial.

There is certainly a great deal of popular appreciation for the attention being paid by government to the nasty reality of anti-

social behaviour at local level, and for the belated official acknowledgement of the extent to which it blights people's lives. There is also undoubtedly a lot of criticism of what is seen as a partial, clumsy and heavy-handed policy approach. Until policy demonstrates an appreciation of the fundamental importance of informal social relations in neighbourhoods, absorbing a broader-based recognition of the nature of respect, the civil renewal and respect agendas are unlikely to gain the momentum or impact intended.⁵ The values of human relationships are not concrete, they have constantly to be reviewed and reasserted; understandings have to be compared and reconciled. It's critical that some of this process takes place with the people who live around us.

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⁵ The term 'civil renewal,' like 'social capital' before it, seems to have disappeared from government language. This very fickleness with the vocabulary of social policy may be a contributing factor in the decline in confidence.

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